

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* sees the author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* return to his native Afghanistan once more with a story of sacrifice and its consequences. It begins in 1952 as young siblings Abdullah and Pari are led by their father Saboor across the desert, towards a meeting which will tear them apart: Pari is to be sold to a rich couple to allow the rest of the family to survive the winter, the finger cut to save the hand. We follow the consequences of this decision for those involved, and how this then affects others near them, in a series of nine narratives from different perspectives. The narration moves from the siblings' step-mother Parwana in 1949 to Abdullah's daughter in 2010, from a poor village in Afghanistan to the suburbs of the United States, but each story is linked to the others and the siblings in some way. It truly is a novel of echoes.

The narrative styles used for these different sections vary widely. We are first given an almost campfire-like experience with Saboor reciting a fairytale to his two children, Abdullah and Pari; this is a first-person present tense story framed by third-person past tense narration. We then move into Abdullah's mind the following day as he walks with his father and sister toward Kabul, in a simple third-person past tense section. Parwana, Saboor's wife and Abdullah and Pari's stepmother, then tells the story of how she came to be with her husband in third-person present tense with flashbacks to the past. Nabi, Parwana's older brother, gives us a letter he has written in first-person which switches between the present, at the time of his writing, and the past events that led to and followed Pari's adoption. Idris, who lived across the street from Pari's adoptive family as a boy, tells us of his return to Afghanistan after the war in pure present-tense. Pari's account of her life in Paris, from her tumultuous relationship with her adoptive mother Nila Wahdati to the raising of her own children, is in third-person present tense with past flashbacks, and is also interspersed with excerpts from a magazine interview with Nila. Adel, the young son of an Afghan war criminal and the narrator who is perhaps most tenuously connected to the central story, tells us in third-person present tense of his meeting with Iqbal, Abdullah and Pari's half-brother. Markos Varvaris, the doctor who moves into the Wahdati residence after they are gone, speaks to us in first-person present tense, again with past tense flashbacks, and finally young Pari, Abdullah's daughter who is named for his lost sister, narrates her search for her namesake in first-person present tense with flashbacks. It is clear from this list that readers may occasionally feel lost with the shifts of both character and style, but it is a credit to the author that this feeling of displacement at the beginning of a new chapter never lasts long.

Even though the style of the novel may change completely between different sections, these are always linked together in some way. Nabi's letter is sent to Markos and later passed on to Pari; a party mentioned in the letter forms a large part of Idris's narrative; a photograph on the wall casually noted by Idris during the party is very important to Markos's story. Even characters themselves tend to be linked to other characters, with the somewhat vain, beautiful Nila Wahdati being echoed later in the novel by Madeline, right down to their allegedly abusive fathers. The repetition of this particular character trope may spoil the suspense of Markos's section for some readers by making Madeline's behaviour predictable, but for the most part picking up on all

Book reviews: *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini. Shari Argent.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.

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of these echoes and discovering the notes that reverberate throughout the novel is satisfying, especially as there are conflicts between the stories at times. Nila in particular skirts the truth on occasion to present a better image of herself in her magazine interview.

While Hosseini does deal with some confronting themes and ideas – there is a particularly harrowing scene involving a young girl and the aftermath of an axe attack – the interconnectedness of his narratives means that everything has its place. Nothing feels as if it has been added simply for shock value or to elicit emotion from readers, although there is certainly plenty of emotion in the story and the way it is written. The language may stumble at times, but also presents some effective images, as in an early scene with the two siblings:

Abdullah rolled to his back, and Pari adjusted, fitting her cheek into the familiar nook beneath his collarbone. He breathed in the coppery smell of desert dust and looked up at a sky thick with stars like ice crystals, flashing and flickering. A delicate crescent moon cradled the dim ghostly outline of its full self. (29)

The language used in scenes like this gives the story an almost fairytale-like quality, which seems to be consistent with the author's intentions. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Hosseini suggested that his novel is 'kind of like a fairytale turned on its head'. The narratives towards the middle of the book do not generally give this impression, but the initial myth-like story of the *div* introduces the novel in a manner reminiscent of a fairytale, and the final chapter clearly subverts these expectations. It does this quite overtly: a character believes that her problems have been solved by a 'magic chant like a genie in a fairy tale' (373), a song from the beginning of the novel which she repeats, but the narrator tells us she will soon realise she is mistaken. The story may begin like a fairytale, but it does not end like one. Hosseini, however, is careful not to leave us hanging with this ending. It is safe to say that the siblings do find each other again, but not in the manner that we imagine – a twist neatly foreshadowed at the beginning of the story. Everything is linked, with each section of the story echoing another part of it in some way, and the end is no exception.

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